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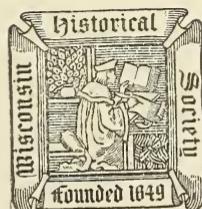
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INDIAN AGRICULTURE IN SOUTHERN WISCONSIN

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Indian Agriculture in Southern Wisconsin

By Benjamin Horace Hibbard, Ph. D.¹

Early writers and travellers were lamentably negligent in recording many phases of Indian life which it would be desirable to know, especially those related to the economic activities of these primitive people. An undue amount of "historical divination" is required in arriving at satisfactory or even plausible conclusions concerning some of these matters. The real influence which aboriginal agriculture exercised upon the exploration, settlement, and development of the Western lands, is well worth our study. The new comer often received therefrom suggestions as to what crops would most likely flourish on the various soils and in the different rain-belts; not to mention the direct effect upon lines of supplies bought or stolen from the retreating tribes—these are interesting questions, but we must not expect much specific information concerning them. The methods of hunting and fighting; of making weapons, utensils, and implements; of dancing, singing, wooing, are all told by early chroniclers with painstaking minuteness and detail, but the products of the soil are noticed by them only in parenthetical phrases or general observations. There is hardly a line yet found, relating to the agricultural tools used, or the

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sort of ground chosen for fields—absolutely nothing as to yield, and next to nothing concerning the importance of these crops to the Indians themselves.

For a long time the Sauk and Foxes had their principal villages near the Wisconsin River, at the east end of Sauk Prairie, just opposite the northwest corner of Dane County. These Indians were somewhat above the average of the tribes of this region in civilization; they lived in more compact and larger settlements, hence naturally depended more on their corn-fields than did their more nomadic neighbors to the west. Their corn was planted along the edge of the woods which fringe the Wisconsin, and this belt is choice corn-land today. Some small parts of it have been kept in grass from the time of the earlier white settlement, and in those places old Indian corn-hills may still be seen, the sod holding them in shape. The Indian cultivated the growing corn by hoeing toward the hill; and as this became the mellowest spot, the corn was planted each succeeding year in the same little mound, which grew to be a foot or more in height.

"There was a large settlement of Sauk at the lower end of Sauk Prairie. I have often examined the remains of their village there, and should suppose they raised corn in one lot of at least four hundred acres * * * the four hundred acres is covered with well formed, regular corn-hills."¹ Just what this writer means by "regular" is not quite clear—probably that the hills were of uniform size, and approximately the same distance apart, for it does not appear that the Indians often planted corn in rows, there being, with their mode of culture, very little occasion for such methods.² The Indians of northern Michigan at the present day generally care for their corn much as did their ancestors of a century ago; and the few

¹ Wisconsin State Agricultural Society *Transactions*, i, p. 125.

² "At every step they dig a round hole in which they sow nine or ten grains of maize which they have first carefully selected and soaked for some days in water."—Carr, *Indian Mounds of the Mississippi Valley*, p. 15.

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who attempt its cultivation with a horse cultivator do not take the precaution to plant the corn in rows, but run here and there wherever there happens to be sufficient room between the hills.

Whether or not the Wisconsin Indians, like those of Ohio or New England, girdled trees so as to rid the land of them, and leave it in a suitable condition for cultivation by their rude and ineffective tools, is not stated; but the probability is that little of such work was necessary.¹ The field at Sauk Prairie just mentioned, lay along the border of the woodland; and as the prairie was burned off nearly every year, it is reasonable to suppose that the fire crept into the woods for a greater or less distance, killing the trees and leaving a considerable belt neither distinctively prairie nor woods. Naturally this would become overgrown with weeds and saplings, which could be much more easily eradicated than the heavy growth of trees or grass. The prairie sod was altogether too tough to be subdued by the Indians, and nowhere do we find them tilling any considerable area of genuine prairie soil.

There are one or two direct references to Indian fields within Dane County. While stationed at Fort Crawford, Jefferson Davis visited this section and left in his journal some remarks pertinent to our subject: "While on detached service in the summer of 1829, I think I encamped one night about the site of Madison. The nearest Indian village was on the opposite side of the lake. * * * The Indians subsisted largely on Indian corn and wild rice."² Probably he referred to the place now known as Winnequah, on the eastern shore of Lake Monona, where a few Indian corn-hills are still discernable. The nature of the land here at the time of the

¹ "In the fall of 1814 the late Col. Dickson was stopped here [Lake Winnebago] by the ice and compelled to remain during the Winter. * * * He cleared the land, now cultivated by the Indians."—Journal of Mrs. James D. Doty, in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, x, p. 114.

² *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, x, p. 75.

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Indian occupancy, cannot now be estimated with the same accuracy as in the case of the Sauk district. It is not on the edge of a prairie; but from the condition of the present woods about Winnequah, and the sandy nature of the soil, it is altogether likely that there were sufficient open spots for all the corn-fields which the small villages of Indians would be likely to cultivate.

Capt. Jonathan Carver, who made a trip through the northwest in 1766, in speaking of the Winnebago Indians remarks: "The land adjacent to the lake [Winnebago] is very fertile, abounding with grapes, plums, and other fruits, which grow spontaneously. The Winnebagoes raise on it a great quantity of Indian corn, beans, pumpkins, squashes, and watermelons, with some tobacco."¹ Carver also gives an interesting description of the kind of corn grown by the Indians. We should infer from what little he says that it is very similar, although not identical, with the corn raised by the New England Indians in the seventeenth century: "One spike generally consists of about six hundred grains which are placed closely together in rows to the number of eight or ten, and sometimes twelve."² He does not tell us whether or not it is dented; but since he finds it maturing as far north as Lake Winnebago, and especially as the ears are long and slender, it is safe to infer that it was the hard flint variety known as "Yankee corn." In case the four hundred acres near Sauk Prairie produced such remarkably large ears—averaging, we should judge, at least a foot in length, the aggregate yield must have been very great. Reasoning from this, it is easy to believe the various reports of discoveries of fifty thousand bushels of corn in *cache* by armies in the Ohio Valley, and to the southward. However, the element of uncertainty is by no means a negligible quantity, and the reader must draw his own conclusions as to the probable amount of farm produce raised by the Wisconsin Indian.

¹ *Travels in North America*, p. 37.

² *Ibid.*, p. 521.

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For the most part, the practices and methods of these Indians resembled those of the tribes farther east. The Sauk and Foxes were scattered up and down the Wisconsin and Fox rivers; wherever found, they depended for a living, in part, on the cultivated product of the soil.¹ In raising a crop of corn, or other field products, the Indians had many difficulties with which to contend, even more perplexing than those connected with subduing the native soil. Perhaps the depredations of blackbirds and crows were the worst; for as soon as other food began to fail them in the fall, they pounced upon the corn, usually when it was about in the milk or "roasting ear," and wrought sad havoc. The Indians were always inordinately fond of the tender, green corn, and this fact, together with the danger of loss by birds or frost from leaving it out until maturity, induced them to gather it early. They were familiar with the fact that corn may be cured while yet in the green state, and still be desirable food; this fact, as well as the method of storing, appears in the following quotation:² "I observed several women with bags on their heads and shoulders, appearing heavily laden, bent down and not raising their faces from the path they were upon. I never saw individuals contend more with a load that almost mastered them, than did some of these females. Following them a short distance to a place where they stopped, I found they were making a *cache* of the ripe maize of the season. A sort of cave had been hollowed out in the side of the hill, about eight feet in diameter at the bottom, and not more than two or three at the top. To this *cache* the women were bringing the corn, a distance of about three miles, and some very young girls were in the cave storing it away. * * * The ears of maize are gathered and cured whilst the corn is in the milk, and the bags when filled with it are laid in the cave upon layers of dry grass, one layer above another. When the cave is full,

¹ See Coues, *Pike's Expeditions* (N. Y., 1895), pp. 294-303; also brief mention in the Reedsburg Free Press, July 23, 1874.

² G. W. Featherstonhaugh, *Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor*, p. 350.

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straw is put in and covered over with dry earth. They cure the corn in the milk, because the blackbirds are numerous enough to devour it all if it were left to ripen in the field."¹ From this it is seen that the agricultural methods of Wisconsin Indians were not different from those farther east and south—the women do the work; the corn is gathered before fully ripe, and put in *caches* for safe keeping.

It would be hazardous to attempt any estimate of the quantity of corn raised, even by any one tribe. The Sauk and Foxes appear to have depended more on products of the soil than did their neighbors. The four hundred acres raised near where Sauk City now stands, is good evidence of a total product of no slight proportions, for these Indians had many other villages scattered along the line of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers. Speaking of these tribes as a whole, Worden remarks: "The Sacs and Foxes raise corn, beans and melons, and derive a great part of their subsistence from agriculture and gardening."²

Indian improvidence is usually spoken of as though the red man had no regard whatever for the morrow; but Pike credits the Osage with the virtue of rigid economy in saving their corn and beans for seasons when the chase is likely to fail in supplying the larder.³ The same author mentions the drying of pumpkins, for winter use, by the Indians of the plains. In the same strain Father Allouez, who visited the Western Indians in the early part of 1670, says of the Outagami: "These savages * * * are settled in an excellent country,—the soil, which is black there, yielding them Indian corn in abundance. They live by hunting during the winter returning to their cabins towards its close, and living there on Indian

¹ In Chas. W. Burkett, *History of Ohio Agriculture* (Concord, 1900), the point is made that the Indians unconsciously practiced a careful system of selection by taking the best and earliest corn each year for seed. This seems reasonable, but Professor Burkett does not give his authority for the statement.

² Worden, *United States*, ii, p. 539.

³ Coues, *Pike's Expeditions*, p. 532.

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corn that they had hidden away the previous Autumn; they season it with fish."¹ Again, in speaking of the Oumamis, [Miami], he mentions the fact that on the first of May they still had corn which they offered him to eat; and of the Potawatomi, that their land is "very good for Indian corn, of which they plant fields, and to which they very willingly retire to avoid the famines that are too common in these quarters." These famines were usually the result of drouth which, by drying up the forage plants, drove the big game away to other sections,² leaving the poor Indians dependent on fish and the grain in stock—the latter being, unhappily, seldom or never found in quantities sufficient to tide over a famine of any consequence.³

A traveller in 1669 makes this record on his visit to Green Bay: "I found here only one village of different nations—Ousaki, Pouteouatami, Outagami, Orenibigoutz (i. e. Ouini pegouk)—about six hundred souls. * * * All these Nations have their fields of Indian corn, squashes, beans, and tobacco."⁴

In 1793, Robert Dickson wrote of the Indians near Portage: "At the Falls of the Fox River there is a portage of three-quarters of a mile. The Indians here raise Indian corn, squash, potatoes, melons, and cucumbers in great abundance, and good tobacco. On the low lands by the river great quantities of wild oats [rice] grow."⁵

As a rule the Indian depended on corn and beans to support him during his long excursions, whether in peace or war. In the account of the capture of the Hall girls, which occurred

¹ Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* (Cleveland, 1896-1901), liv, p. 223.

² *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii, p. 139.

³ Many incidental references to the sorry plight of the Wisconsin Indians in times when game was scarce may be found in the *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, especially in the Grignon and Dickson papers, xi, pp. 271-315.

⁴ *Jesuit Relations*, liv, pp. 205, 207.

⁵ *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii, pp. 134, 135.

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about May, 1832, there is a good side-light on the Indian commissariat: "When we halted, the Indians having scalded some beans, and roasted some acorns, desired we should eat. * * * On our arrival several squaws came to our assistance * * * prepared a place for us to sit down, and presented us some parched corn, some meal, and maple sugar, mixed, and desired us to eat. * * * In the evening we were presented with a supper consisting of coffee, fried cakes, boiled corn, and fried venison, with fried leeks. * * * When our flour was exhausted we had coffee, meat, and pounded corn made into soup."¹ Later, it is mentioned that the Indians carried pork and potatoes while on the march. The pork as well as the coffee was, of course, obtained from the whites, but the potatoes, so-called, were probably wild artichokes which Lapham found in use as food among the Indians in what is now Brown County. In 1844 he found them using "a very good kind of potato * * * the mode of preserving which was entirely new to us. The potatoes, which are of an oblong shape, and not longer than a man's thumb are partially boiled, and carefully peeled while hot, without breaking the pulp, and strung like so many beads upon a twine or tough thread of bark and then hung in festoons on the ridge pole of the wigwam, over the smoke of the fire, where they became thoroughly dry. This process renders the potatoes fit for transportation and use during the severest frosts without injury. The squaws take great interest in preparing this article of food which is about the only vegetable they cultivate."² However, the Indians around Green Bay were by no means restricted to one agricultural product, although contact with the white men tended to make them more and more dependent, since they found it easier to barter furs for food than to raise grain.

¹ Smith, *Wisconsin*, iii, pp. 189-195.

² Lapham, *Wisconsin*, p. 116. Although Lapham was a scientist he does not venture to give the botanical name of this plant, which was evidently a puzzle to him.

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From the above citations, it appears that the cultivated fields of the Indians occupied a diagonal line across the state, following the courses of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers and Green Bay; and that the Sauk, Foxes, and Winnebago were the most inclined, in the struggle for existence, to make use of their agricultural knowledge and opportunities. It may also be shown that there were some important cultivated areas along the Mississippi and Rock rivers, and some insignificant patches near Lake Michigan. The settlement of Black Hawk's followers on the lower part of the Rock, on the point between that river and the Mississippi is of interest, and these were Wisconsin Indians, who had resumed their agricultural labors in a new home.

Something of the skill of these people in choosing land on which to grow corn, also an idea of the quantity grown, are furnished by Black Hawk in his *Autobiography*: "In the front a prairie extended to the Mississippi, and in our rear a continued bluff gently ascended from the prairie. * * * On the side of this bluff we had our corn fields, extending about two miles up parallel with the larger river, where they adjoined those of the Foxes, whose village was on the same stream opposite the lower end of Rock Island and three miles distant from ours. We had eight hundred acres in cultivation, including what we had on the islands in Rock River. The land around our village which remained unbroken, was covered with blue-grass which furnished excellent pasture for our horses. * * * The land being very fertile never failed to produce good crops of corn, beans, pumpkins, and squashes."¹

Black Hawk then goes on to state that, owing to encroachments of the white settlers, his people had hard work to find sufficient land on which to plant corn, and gives a sorrowful account of the distress caused by the confiscation of their crops

¹ *Autobiography of Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, or Black Hawk* (St. Louis, 1882), pp. 57, 58.

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by the whites. Black Hawk does not give any estimate of the area cultivated by the Foxes, but Col. John Shaw, in speaking of both settlements, estimates the fields at five thousand acres.¹ This is probably an exaggeration, but it serves its purpose in giving some notion of the importance of agricultural industry to the Indians themselves, and surely it was not inconsiderable. Anyone wishing to estimate the amount of these products by the various tribes, will find some data in the *Emigrant's and Traveller's Guide*, where a fairly good estimate of the numbers of the several Indian tribes in 1834 appears.²

A great many more references could be given, emphasizing the reliance of the red man on his rude husbandry; but perhaps enough has already been said to make it plain that something is due him for taking the initial step in the development of the great grain regions of the upper Mississippi valley. Neither are we left wholly to deduce our conclusions from circumstantial evidence. The early military expeditions of the West and Northwest were for the most part dependent on supplies obtained from the Indians.³ The accounts of the Lewis and Clark expedition tell of the dependence of the party on provisions furnished by the Indians, and even so far north as the Mandan village they traded for Indian corn.⁴ At Mackinac Island, a point hardly within the present corn belt,

¹ *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, x, p. 220.

² Tanner, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi or the Emigrant's and Traveller's Guide to the West* (Philadelphia, 1834).

³ In a letter to Brehm, Governor Sinclair speaks of sending a sloop through the lake region in the fall of 1779 to collect all the grain and other provisions available, to be used in the campaign against St. Louis the following spring. In others of the Haldimand papers are direct statements to the effect that the provisions for the St. Louis expedition were to be gathered principally from the Indians along Wisconsin River, where corn was said to be abundant, and as a matter of fact this plan appears to have been carried out.—*Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xi, pp. 141-184.

⁴ Thwaites, *Original Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*; Gass's *Journal*, p. 99.

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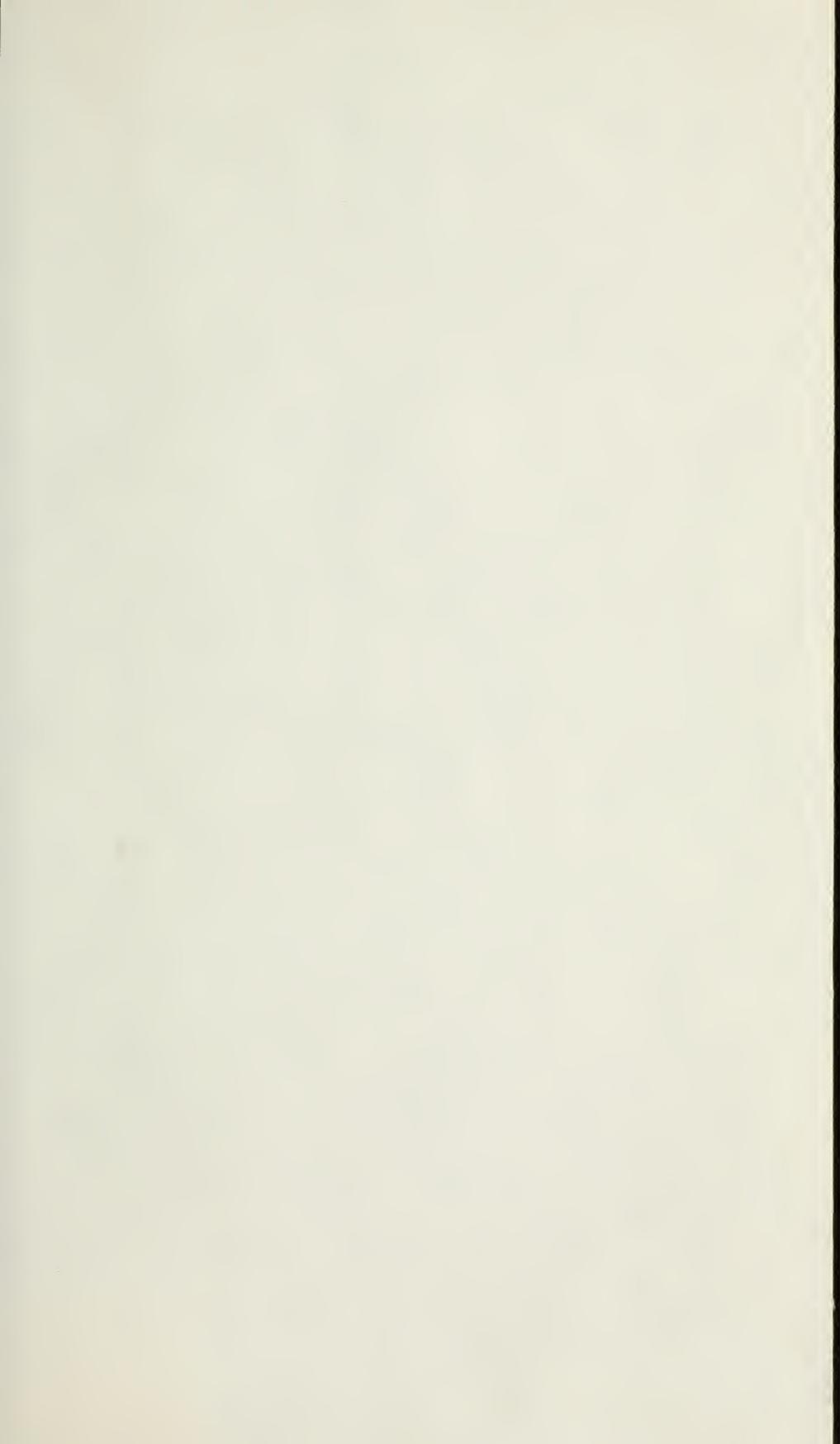
the Indians raised a sufficient quantity of that cereal to attract the attention of the British garrison as well as of various travellers. As early as 1766 Jonathan Carver saw the importance of the agricultural products of the Wisconsin Indians, and after enumerating the crops grown by the "Saukies" before mentioned, speaks thus of the Sauk village: "This place is esteemed the best market for traders to furnish themselves with provisions, of any within eight hundred miles of it."¹

Thus it is seen that the Indians, on their own account furnished provisions for their own war parties; for the English forays against Americans and Spanish; for explorers like Marquette, Carver, and Lewis and Clark, and the long list of later adventurers who came to spy out the land and eventually to expel the tribesmen from their fields. The traders who ranged the woods and rivers for a century before civilization ruined their traffic, depended in a large measure on the meagre stores of Indian corn and beans; while even the troops which finally hunted the natives from their homes, filled their camp kettles either from the *caches* or the corn fields of the fugitives. Nor was this all. The earliest settlers seized upon the little cultivated plots as the most desirable ground for their own first plantings, and utilized the native-grown seed, since it was known to be adapted to the soil and climate. It is interesting to note that the two crops which the Indians prized most highly, corn and tobacco, are at present two of the foremost products of Wisconsin.²

¹Carver, *Travels*, p. 47.

²For an excellent statement of the difficulties of treating the question of Indian agriculture, and some general remarks on Indian land tenure, see Bureau of Amer. Ethnology *Report*, 1885-86, p. 40 ff.—Ed.

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